THE VICTORIAN AGE MILIEU

Lavinia Hulea
Lecturer, PhD, University of Petrosani

Abstract: The Victorian Age was one of the longest periods in the history of Great Britain and affected as well the countries that entered, at one moment or another, under its influence. The delineation of the Victorian Age ranged between 1830 and 1901 and covered, for its most part, the reign of Queen Victoria; it is largely accepted that Victorianism, in its broader meaning, included both the formal Regency which stretched between 1811 and 1820 (in 1810 King George III was deemed unfit to exert his prerogatives due to the fact that he manifested signs of a recurrent mental illness and his eldest son, George, Prince of Wales, ruled as Prince Regent), the Napoleonic wars (1803 – 1815, which comprised several wars between the French Empire of Napoleon and the coalitions led by Great Britain) as well as the interval that closely succeeded Queen Victoria's reigning years – the Edwardian age and the period before World War I.

Keywords: Victorian Age, English society, religious thought, social criticism, empiricism.

1. GENERAL FRAMEWORK

The Victorian Age was one of the longest periods in the history of Great Britain and affected as well the countries that entered, at one moment or another, under its influence as colonies (the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, territories in Africa and Asia), dominions (Canada), and regions under British control (Egypt, Sudan).

The delineation of the Victorian Age ranged between 1830 and 1901 and covered, for its most part, the reign of Queen Victoria; it is largely accepted that Victorianism, in its broader meaning, included both the formal Regency which stretched between 1811 and 1820 (in 1810 King George III was deemed unfit to exert his prerogatives due to the fact that he manifested signs of a recurrent mental illness and his eldest son, George, Prince of Wales, ruled as Prince Regent), the Napoleonic wars (1803 – 1815, which comprised several wars between the French Empire of Napoleon and the coalitions led by Great Britain) as well as the interval that closely succeeded Queen Victoria's reigning years – the Edwardian age and the period before World War I.

The beginning of the nineteenth century was an age that bore the imprint of several remarkable events; among them, the 1815 battle of Waterloo put an end to Napoleonic wars. After Napoleon's escape from his exile on Elba and his triumphant march towards Paris, England feared French domination in Europe and ordered a general mobilization of its whole army that ultimately included even its guard regiments and, together with its allied powers – the Dutch and the Prussians – under the command of the Duke of Wellington, the English defeated Napoleon's army in a crucial historic battle that marked the beginning of the assertion of England's position as an European leader and as world's imperial power.

The prominent role England was going to play, after its tremendous success in the battlefield, was largely the result of Industrial Revolution which shifted the country's condition

from an agriculture-founded economy towards manufacture production and an exports-relying trade. The changes occurring in industrial production not only determined a shift of England's economy; they came to affect the lives of its citizens resulting in a paradoxical situation with prosperity at the upper end and for a limited number of individuals and misery at the lower end, in the case of the masses. The country that was changing dramatically also witnessed an increase of its population from about two million, in 1837 – when Victoria ascended the throne – to almost six million, in 1901, the year of her death.

Another crucial event that forged the wide context of the Victorian Age was the 1832 Representation of the People Act (or the Reform Law) which introduced significant changes to the electoral system and stipulated the increase of the number of voting citizens. That growth, which meant almost the doubling of the figures, was interpreted as the result of the growing population of industrialized cities like Manchester and Liverpool and also perceived as having initialized a long-term process of democracy.

Queen Victoria had reigned for 64 years and imprinted her mark on the epoch in various ways so that the age came to reflect values that the Queen herself embraced, such as moral responsibility and domestic propriety. Nonetheless, that long period of time under a sole sovereign, far from being a homogenous epoch, was marked by social dissolution and the negative aspects of industrialization. Owing to the fact that it is often difficult to find out all-pervasive features capable of embracing such long intervals, historians chose to consider the epoch as a three-fold period comprising the following sub-divisions: early Victorianism, between 1830 and 1848, middle Victorianism (1848 – 1870), and late Victorianism (1870 – 1901).

2. EARLY VICTORIANISM: 1830 – 1848

Early Victorianism was mainly tormented by political and social issues that could be perceived as a result of unprecedented industrialization triggering poverty as well as internal instability. The period between 1830 and 1840 was known as the "Time of Troubles" and resulted in serious economic crises determining the deepening of the decreased living standard of the masses and a high rate of criminality. Irish famine – which registered about one million deaths globally – paired with volunteering exile to America and England and the tremendous growth of the poor. Working conditions were extremely precarious for most labourers and the system also included children and women who worked in tough factory conditions.

Nonetheless, the gloomy social and economic environment had its brighter counterpart in several political decisions that led the way towards reform as well as in certain inventions of the human mind that were about to change the world. Chartism, a working-class movement for political reform, active between 1838 and the 1850s, initiated a long-term process of reforming the British Parliament which focused upon limiting the powers of the higher chamber while giving wider prerogatives to the Communes and directing voting towards democracy. The Chartists also planned to fight for the workers' rights and, although their group was no more functional by 1848, they opened the way for reform during a period which also witnessed the beginning of the first movements for women's rights.

The trade law of 1846 - which, together with its previous counterpart in 1815, were known as the Corn Laws – was designed to offer protection to the British and Irish cereal producers against foreign imports. It imposed an elevated price on imported grains resulting, on the one hand, in profitable incomes for the local producers in agriculture and, on the other hand,

in increased prices on basic food products which had a negative overall impact upon the living standard.

Technological progress had been made possible by railroad facilities able to carry goods and individuals at lower costs and higher speed as well as by water transportation that came to support an increasingly developing industry.

3. MIDDLE VICTORIANISM: 1848 – 1870

The period stretching between 1848 and 1870 was characterized by tremendous development relying upon internal stability, economic growth, a wide range of reforms, and cultural, scientific, and technological flourishing. However, although it was a time of prosperity for England as a whole, common people were still confronted with chronic poverty in an epoch that appeared to display paradoxical characteristics.

By 1850, England's science, industry and technology generated a wide optimism and confidence in prosperity emphasized by the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its Crystal Palace built according to modern architectural principles and using modern materials. They were meant to testify for the country's progress and inaugurated the succeeding series of events of that kind in Europe. The exhibition not only asserted Britain's economic capacity and wide-range technological expansion – show-casing steam engines, electric telegraphs, printing machines, etc. – but also emphasized British capacity of employing the raw materials and labour belonging to its colonies.

During that period, the British Empire came to include countries located in various regions of the globe such as Canada, Australia, and India which all contributed to the welfare made possible by the industrial revolution.

City life had been changing as the flourishing towns – London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. – were provided with lots of public establishments, boulevards, and means of transport. It is worth mentioning that the British Parliament relocated to a new building, that the works of London subway got started, and double-deckers were launched while the Suez Channel and telegraph messages cut short distances and time.

Despite a general trend of economic prosperity and the steady growth of the British Empire, mid-Victorian period saw the increase of religious controversies as well as new manners of interpreting the Bible. Accordingly, the Church of England divided into three factions - the Low Church (supporting the necessity of personal conversion and the tendency toward evangelicalism), the Broad Church (including the Anglicans who praised the ethical teachings of the Church and who were tolerant of various forms of conformity to ecclesiastical authority), and the High Church (encompassing the tendency toward ritualism and Anglo-Catholicism) while religious beliefs came to be scrutinized and doubted by rationalist thinkers. Religion was perceived as mere superstition by the utilitarian Benthamites (advocating individual and economic freedom, the separation of church and state, and freedom of expression) and, relying on the epoch's scientific discoveries, Higher Criticism – that employed the critical methods arising from the rationalistic context of the age in order to evaluate the Bible - asserted the idea that the Bible had nothing to do with the divine, but was instead a produce of various human writers during the ages. Charles Darwin's scientific writings – *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) – stood out as unprecedented works questioning creation and man's role in the world.

Meanwhile, England had been involved in a series of armed conflicts which either targeted at limiting the influence of a certain country over other countries (the War of Crimea) or determined the overall shift of the entire British foreign policy in order to be able to rule the colonies (the 1857 upheaval in India).

4. LATE VICTORIANISM: 1870 – 1901

For most historians, the interval ranging between 1870 and 1901 appeared to have maintained Britain's determination to assimilate and widely use technological progress - owing, for instance, to wireless telegraphy and telephony – and to have marked a peak in industrial development. It is worth mentioning that the period witnessed a significant increase of life duration as a result of the improvement of the general living standard and of lower infantile mortality. According to the time censuses, about 80 % of the British population lived in urban areas which had gradually enlarged and come to include neighbouring rural regions. New debates were determined by the Irish issue whose origins could be linked with Ireland's Great Famine of 1845 when the potatoes crops of the country registered a 50% loss and was followed by two more disastrous years; the famine and the lack of British support resulted in a severe decrease of Ireland's population between 1846 and 1850 (about 25%), in immigration and the emergence of secret organisations that wanted the British out of the country. On the other hand, working-class citizens were given enlarged voting rights owing to the second Reform Bill in 1867.

However, others (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for instance) were starting to question the foundations that made possible such prosperity as well as the country's foreign domination and despite the British striving to continue building its empire, it started to be weakened by colonial wars and upheavals: the two Boer Wars (fought during 1880-1881 and 1899-1902 against the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State) and the colonial war in Sudan (1881-1899, when Sudan became an Anglo-Egyptian condominium) could be perceived as signs of an upcoming crisis that would jolt dramatically the human, financial, and military resources of England.

Queen Victoria was succeeded by her elder son, Edward VII who not only inaugurated a new century but changed a lot of the perceptions, strict mentalities and protestant values of the previous period. The years to come represented a transition from the Victorian Age towards the Modernist period which increasingly challenged Victorian optimism.

5. VICTORIAN SOCIETY, RELIGION, AND SOCIAL THOUGHT

An entire epoch of changes inaugurated by the debate on Reform during the 1830s had shaken both the Church and the State. And the 1832 Reform Bill came to be widely considered as the foundation of a new era of transformations. The attack on Parliament's functioning and on the State framework had been accompanied by an attack on the Church and its properties. The main reforming trend considered that the redistribution of seats in the Parliament had to be completed with a reform of the Church which, and according to the epoch's

reformers such a change could be have been accomplished either with the agreement of the Church or by force. The involvement of the State in Church matters determined the coming out of the 'Oxford Movement', also known as the 'Tractarian Movement' (whose appellation derived from a number of 90 publications called *Tracts for the Times* appearing during the period 1833 – 1841 which were meant to draw attention on the movement's doctrine) that initiated a whole campaign against secularism. The movement expressed its discontent with theological liberalism and reconsidered the relational terms between the Church of England (the officially established Christian church in England, dating since AD 597) and the Roman Catholic Church, underlining the conception of Church as the body of Christ as well as the catholic nature of the Church, advocating the separation of Church and State with a view to eliminating the interference of the government into religion. The beginnings of the Tractarian Movement are linked to Reverend John Keble (1792 – 1866) whose sermon "National Apostasy" is considered the catalyst behind the movement. Keble enjoyed a considerable influence at the time owing to his book of devotional poetry *The Christian Year*. The book whose intention was to inspire Christians to see God in their everyday lives was first published in 1827 but another 158 editions appeared subsequently.

The Oxford Movement also benefited from the ideas and work of one of its most important leaders: John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890), also referred to as Cardinal Newman, a personality that was considered to possess a subtle intelligence, vast learning and philosophical rigor; as an evangelical Oxford academic and priest belonging to the Church of England, he wrote several of the *Tracts for the Times*, the movement's doctrinal pamphlets targeting at the inclusion of certain Catholic beliefs and forms of worship into the Church of England. During a period of spreading liberalism and widened lack of belief, Newman was also concerned with defending religious faith and institutions and his thinking is seen by certain authors as an attack on Victorian liberalism:

"Is Newman still a great Victorian? His claim to be anything more than a religious curiosity must rest on his theory of belief and his dissent from liberalism. One is an abstruse series of philosophical speculations, the other a detailed indictment of the modern spirit." (Pattison, 1991)

While having preserved unchanged two of his initial convictions - his devotion to religious causes and Christianity as an institutional and dogmatic religion which made the revelation of God possible – he, nonetheless changed his faith - and commitment - in the Church of England as the justified voice of authority in the nineteenth century, entering the English Roman Catholic Church in 1845; his action was largely perceived as a blow both at Protestantism and at English insularity.

The years of early Victorian England saw the coming to front of another important social thinker, the receptacle of a Scottish Presbyterian tradition and of Edinburgh Enlightenment. His name was Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881). His 1829 essay entitled 'Signs of Times', published in *Edinburgh Review*,had a vivid impact on his contemporaries as he draw out a description of his own epoch, the era of machinery. Carlyle complained of a social milieu dominated by machineries where people attached mechanical definitions to both their opinions and their relationships. He set forth – in *Sartor Resartus*, for instance, first serialized in *Fraser's Magazine* between 1833 and 1834- the contradictions of the new civilization and, more important, he exposed the gap between social classes while also attacking Utilitarianism and the growing commercialization of British society. Carlyle, who, in the opinion of a large number of scholars, had been the figure that most powerfully influenced his youngest contemporaries (John Stuart

Mill, Dickens, who read and re-read *The French Revolution: A History* when he wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* and dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle, George Eliot, etc.) was also perceived as having initiated a trend, followed by later Victorians, which strived "to use the language and emotional power of Christianity without accepting its doctrines." (Cockshut, 1987) In *The French Revolution: A History*, published in 1837, Carlyle went against the orthodox historiography style widely adopted by historians and frequently employed present-tense and first-person plural involving both the writer and the reader in the rendering of the events having occurred in the streets of Paris. His large use of metaphor and personification amplifies the dramatic effect of his writing that might be perceived as a combination of "modern fact and ancient myth, of journalism and Scripture" (Carlyle, 2002):

"This huge Insurrectionary Movement, …, has swept away Royalty, Aristocracy, and a King's life. The question is, What will it next do; how will it henceforth shape itself? Settle down into a reign of Law and Liberty; according as the habits, persuasions and endeavour of the educated, monied, respectable class prescribe? That is to say: the volcanic lava-flood, bursting up in the manner described, will explode and flow according to Girondin Formula and pre-established rule of Philosophy? If so, for our Girondin friends it will be well.

Meanwhile were not the prophecy rather that as no external force, Royal or other, now remains which could control this Movement, the Movement will follow a course of its own; probably a very original one? Further, that whatsoever man or men can best interpret the inward tendencies it has, and give them voice and activity, will obtain the lead of it? For the rest, that as a thing without order, a thing proceeding from beyond and beneath the region of order, it must work and welter, not as a Regularity but as a Chaos; destructive and self-destructive; always till something that has order arise, strong enough to bind it into subjection again? Which something, we may further conjecture, will not be a Formula, with philosophical propositions and forensic eloquence; but a Reality, probably with a sword in its hand!" (Carlyle, 2002)

Carlyle considered that chaotic events such as revolutions required 'heroic leadership' capable of mastering erupting forces and, once 'heroic human action' was put aside by ideological stereotypes, society became dehumanized. He asserted such beliefs in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic History* (1841) where various types of heroes, belonging to domains ranging from literature to politics and religion, were compared (Shakespeare, Dante, Samuel Johnson, Cromwell, Martin Luther, the Prophet Muhammad) and found exceptional owing to their creative energy when confronted with difficulties.

Although critics' opinions ranged Carlyle's visions of unavoidable events – the French Revolution, for instance, seen as a punishment for collective sin and a critics of a fallen society - within Calvinist doctrine, their character testified clearly of historical writing rather than of a doctrinal one and Carlyle's two histories, *The French Revolution: A History* and *Friedrich II of Prussia, Called Friedrich the Great* (1858 - 1865), are still considered 'the epics of their age.' (Sanders, 1987)

6. VICTORIAN MORAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

When John Ruskin (1819 – 1900) expressed his admiration for Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), he had already been perceived as a lucid mind attempting to understand his own age in its entirety through close and penetrating observation. Although he became largely known owing to the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) – where he asserted that the basic goal of artists

should be 'truth to nature' – by the end of the 1850s, Ruskin was considered to have changed the register from art to social issues.

Accordingly, he focused on attacking the utilitarian theories of the time as well as industrial capitalism. His four essays gathered in *Unto This Last* (1862) had been first published in the *Cornhill Magazine* edited by William Makepeace Thackeray, between August and November 1860 and contained opinions on labour division - which he judged as dehumanizing due to having separated labourers from their products - on the epoch's political economy that failed to consider social aspects, on life as the only possible wealth or on individuals' helpful influence upon the others. His social criticism questioned aspects that regarded a various range of issues, from labour dignity to charity work and social structure, but, in spite of certain enthusiastic appreciations (such as Thomas Carlyle's), most part of the press received the essays with a hostile reaction.

It is widely known that John Ruskin was not sympathetic with middle-class philistinism (the term 'Philistines' is considered to have derived its modern cultural significance from Arnold) and his attitude matched Matthew Arnold's (1822 – 1888) perception on the drawbacks of the nineteenth-century British culture. In his essays gathered in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold not only made popular his term of Philistines, but also asserted the idea of a culture that had to observe two basic features: it had to include both past achievements and support progressive improvement. In dealing with the threatening of 'popular anarchy', he envisaged the force of a culture that contained poetry as well as religion and was able to behave like a catalyst to democracy. For him the ideal was an expression of Hellenistic values and Hebraic earnestness where culture ceased to display its elitist character and, instead, became an inheritance of experience and discovery outlining a plausible future without religion:

"The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines, is no doubt the same: man's perfection or salvation. …

…The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience. Nothing can do away with this ineffaceable difference; the Greek quarrel with the body and its desires is, that they hinder right thinking, the Hebrew quarrel with them is, that they hinder right acting. …, while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience." (Arnold, 1869)

Scholars noticed that his ideas were the result of both his epoch's social and class discrepancies and of the decline of conventional religious belief.

7. VICTORIAN EMPIRICISM

By 1860, English society was already exhibiting the signs of a crisis of faith and Charles Darwin's (1809 - 1882) book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859)appeared to take a path that was questioning and reassessing issues which regarded morality and politics, on the one hand, and religion and biology, on the other one. Although during the first decades of the nineteenth

century the English scientific milieu had strong connections with the Church of England (the officially established Christian church in England), new, evolutionary ideas emerged as a result of the findings in biological sciences:

"It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked the long lapse of ages, and then so imperfect in our view into long past geological ages, that we only see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were." (Darwin, 1859)

Meanwhile, theories on the transmutation of species could only come to conflict with assertions considering that species could not change as they were part of a settled hierarchy. Yet, owing to the fact that Darwin had already established his reputation as an eminent scientist, his book was received with widespread interest and his theory on the evolution of species through natural selection stirred much debate at the time. The book relied on a large amount of evidence originating in Darwin's Beagle expedition during the 1830s, in his subsequent research and experiments and his study of the new approaches in cell theory, embryology, biogeography or palaeontology. The work determined theological and political discussions as both God and man were denied their century-long attributes and sanctioned places and influenced the secularizing of science through scientific/ methodological naturalism, according to which science should no more refer to supernatural causes).

It was then obvious that the 1850s social and political consensus and confidence gradually disintegrated and were replaced by a period that questioned most of the settled values and institutions. The 1850s and 1860s came to be considered as a time of new assessments on morality, society, and sexuality both concerned with 're-forming' and haunted by the threat of socialism.

Such tensions, originating in the epoch's multi-level debates, appeared to be central to the intellectual trajectory of John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) who was a remarkable contributor to social and political theory as well as to political economy. His personal background as 'heir' of Benthamite tradition - his father, James Mill, had been the disciple of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who formulated the "greatest happiness principle" or the principle of utility – and his strict education enabled him to start up from a solid past education when framing his own conception. Nonetheless, certain authors consider that he came to fight constantly with Utilitarian thinking in that he appeared to make of liberty and rights an ideal at the cost of utility. The central dilemma of Mill's thought had largely been the same with the fundamental issues of the epoch; his inner debate focused on the question dealing with the usefulness of a system which although suited "imaginary creatures in human forms" was not able to function properly for real human beings. He asserted the tremendous importance of individual rights and obligations as well as the part assumed by mental autonomy in an egalitarian society. His theory of liberty, approached in the philosophical work *On Liberty* published in 1859, discussed the relationship between liberty and authority with citizens' liberty controlling governments' tyranny. In his opinion, the fundamental liberties of human beings were the freedom of thought and emotion, the freedom to pursue tastes, and the freedom to unite while his conception of human entirety relied upon a unity of the rational and the emotional. He stressed the importance of individuality as a condition of creativity and diversity in a Western society that he perceived as prone to conformity:

"If it were felt that the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being; that it is not only a co-ordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilisation, instruction, education, culture, but is itself a necessary part and condition of all those things; there would be no danger that liberty should be under-valued, and the adjustment of the boundaries between it and social control would present no extraordinary difficulty. But the evil is, that individual spontaneity I hardly recognised by the common modes of thinking, as having intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account. The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are …, cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody; and what is more, spontaneity forms no part of the ideal of the majority of moral and social reformers, but it rather looked on with jealousy, as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction to the general acceptance of what these reformers, …, think would be best for mankind." (Mill, 1901)

A few years after the publishing of *On Liberty*, Mill collected his essays on utilitarianism in a book which came out in 1863 and encapsulated his own utilitarian statement. According to Jeremy Bentham by whom Mill had been influenced, people should act in order to get the greatest possible happiness which was understood as the prevalence of pleasure over pain. While Bentham considered that all the forms of happiness were equal, Mill asserted that intellectual and moral pleasures were superior to the physical or sensual forms of pleasure and, consequently, the ultimate goal of Utilitarianism implied doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. He assumed that the principle of utility was intrinsic to human nature and was inherent to all human actions. In his vision, it should be seen as the very principle of morality allowing greatest happiness for a greatest number of individuals.

8. CONCLUSIONS

An entire epoch of changes inaugurated by the debate on Reform during the 1830s came to outline what was subsequently labelled as the Victorian Age. While the beginning of Victorianism was mainly tormented by political and social issues that could be perceived as a result of unprecedented industrialization triggering poverty as well as internal instability, the following decades witnessed, on the one hand, a tremendous development relying upon internal stability, economic growth, a wide range of reforms, and cultural, scientific, and technological flourishing, and, on the other hand, the questioning of the foundations that made possible such prosperity together with the weakening of the British empire that could be perceived as signs of an upcoming crisis.

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